

4. Being both

Gender and indigeneity in two Pacific documentary films

Abstract: Transgender is a term originating from a particularly Western discourse of restrictive gender identity that struggles to account for diverse gender identities. Several non-Western cultures, however, especially indigenous cultures, have quite different and varied understandings of gender. Diverse approaches to gender have been framed through dominant Euro-Christian discourses as deviant, immoral and inferior—part of the dangerous alternative knowledge of indigenous cultures that colonialism worked so hard and so violently to eradicate. It is only recently that non-dominant gender discourses have begun visibly and vocally to re-assert themselves as viable and valuable alternatives to the orthodox narratives of pathology and deviance dominating Western gender discussions. The development of an alternative and more celebratory approach to gender diversity can be perceived through two notable documentary films from the Pacific: *Georgie Girl* (Goldson & Wells, 2002) and *Kumu Hina* (Hamer & Wilson, 2014). Rather than starting from a position that sees gender variance as a depressing problem, these stories offer the possibility of re-appropriating transgender as not only normal, but precious.

Keywords: colonialism, documentary, *Georgie Girl*, indigenous, *Kumu Hina*, New Zealand, Pacific film, transgender

SUZANNE WOODWARD

University of Auckland

TRANSGENDER is a term originating from a particularly Western discourse of restrictive gender identity, one so fixed in a dyadic understanding of gender that it struggles to account for diverse gender identities. The lack of linguistic precedent is indicative of a cultural lack, a discursive gap that brings into relief the narrowness of Western gender taxonomies. The collapse of sex and gender, and quite often sexuality, into a reductive linear equation, further complicates understandings and discussions of gender. Gender markers are conflated with biological details, and the floating signifier of gender becomes fixed within the sexual ‘science’ of heteropatriarchy. Several non-Western cultures, however, especially indigenous cultures, have quite different and varied understandings of gender. This is reflected most overtly in their languages—through the presence of words that not only acknowledge more than two genders, but normalise gender variance in ways that are challenging to the Western concept of binary gender

identities.¹ These multiplicitous genders have self-contained status, rather than existing merely as intermediate positions dependent on, and subordinate to, ‘man’ and ‘woman’. In approaching the diversity inherent in ‘Other’ cultures as a challenge to its own dominance, Western ideologies have been used aggressively to defend an extremely restrictive understanding of gender in an attempt to foreclose any opportunity to maintain or develop a more inclusive understanding of gender. Instead, diverse approaches to gender have been framed through dominant Euro-Christian discourses as deviant, immoral and inferior—part of the dangerous alternative knowledge of indigenous cultures that colonialism worked so hard and so violently to eradicate. It is only recently that non-dominant gender discourses have begun visibly and vocally to re-assert themselves as viable and valuable alternatives to the orthodox narratives of pathology and deviance that dominate in Western gender discussions. The development of an alternative and more celebratory approach to gender diversity can be perceived through two notable documentary films from the Pacific: *Georgie Girl* (Goldson & Wells, 2002) and *Kumu Hina* (Hamer & Wilson, 2014). Rather than starting from a position that sees gender variance as a depressing problem, these stories offer the possibility of re-appropriating transgender as not only normal, but precious.

Georgie Girl documents the extraordinary success of Georgina Beyer (of Pākehā, Te Āti Awa, Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāti Raukawa, and Ngāti Porou heritage), the first openly trans Member of Parliament in the world (from 1999-2007). The film is a celebration of the achievements of a Māori transwoman, both as an individual and as a public figure. It is a biography that does not shy away from the struggles or suffering Beyer has faced, but it deliberately constructs a narrative of affirmation, rejecting the ‘victim’ trope so common in Western trans documentaries. The film brings into relief the sense of cultural alienation among many Māori that is prevalent in the post-colonial context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the challenges of successfully negotiating the social and political institutions that continue to be dominated by white, Western, heteronormative values, practices, and policies. *Kumu Hina* is a similarly celebratory film, one that honours Pacific culture, presenting the transgender protagonist as a valued and respected cultural icon rather than a victim, starting from the premise that the traditional Hawai’ian understanding of gender is a preferable one—that reclaiming respect for those ‘in the middle’ is an integral part of fighting back against the cultural annihilation of European colonialism. The film’s official website describes the film as:

A powerful film about the struggle to maintain Pacific Islander culture and values within the Westernised society of modern day Hawai’i. It is told through the lens of an extraordinary Native Hawai’ian who is both a proud and confident māhū, or transgender woman, and an honored and respected kumu, or teacher, cultural practitioner, and community leader. (kumuhina.com, n.d.)

Both of these films adopt an approach that draws on indigenous values and modes of storytelling, constructing a formal as well as a narrative resistance to the 'othering' of traditional Western documentary practices.

More generally, the binaristic rigidity of the conventional Western heteronormative construct has consistently 'othered' those who cannot or will not subscribe to its oppressive conventions regarding gender identity, and the presentation and expression of that identity. The cultural superiority enforced through the patriarchal hierarchy of the European colonial model has marginalised, dismissed, or erased those gender identities which do not conform to its limited discursive construct. When gender intersects with other key identity categories such as culture, ethnicity and class, the potential for oppression, exclusion and persecution escalates drastically. Since Christine Jorgensen's story blazed into the public imagination in the 1970s, through dramatic news coverage and a high-profile biopic, there has been a sustained interest/sensationalist curiosity in heteronormativity's Other, in much the same way that Orientalist attention has long focussed on the colonial Other. When these 'Others' converge, one could argue that it is merely an amplified version of Orientalist fascination, presented with increasing frequency in popular culture. Representations of trans identities have proliferated in recent decades, in a variety of media formats. Most of these have reproduced the same limited range of stereotypes and orthodox gender narratives, but it is also true that alternative perspectives have increasingly found a voice and sustained visibility.

Certain tropes (such as the 'born in the wrong body' narrative common in Western documentary and feature film drama, and the 'necessary disguise' narrative of film comedy) have contributed to the narrow profile of trans identities within popular culture, but have not necessarily contributed much to dismantling the stranglehold of heteronormative expectations and prejudice—neither stimulating debate nor developing understanding of and empathy with gender variance. In the last few years, however, a few significant trans documentary films have emerged that offer an alternative approach to understanding trans identities, presenting them as part of a broader critique of existing heteropatriarchal institutions—on social, institutional, economic, political and cultural levels. In these films, trans identities no longer exist in isolation from broader contexts; they are no longer peculiar individuals who can be dismissed as anomalies. Instead, gender variance is presented as a given, encouraging all of us to question the taken-for-granted sex and gender binary and its impact.

This shift in trans documentaries has coincided with an increasingly vocal indigenous presence in documentary film. Technological developments have made the medium of documentary film available to marginalised groups previously rendered voiceless by the political economy of mainstream media. While indigenous documentary films and trans documentary films are quite distinct, just as transgender rights and indigenous rights are clearly distinct, there have been a few key films that have brought into focus a connection between colonial and gender oppression. Both of the documentaries discussed in

this article, *Kumu Hina* and *Georgie Girl*, deal with the importance of moving beyond traditional Western understandings of gender; both acknowledge the difficulties of being trans in a predominantly Western environment; and both were made by trans allies looking to tell the stories of extraordinary people living inspiring, yet complicated lives. They have both, to varying degrees, raised questions regarding the intersection between indigenous culture and gender identity, about the role of colonialism and colonial institutions in attempting to circumscribe and regulate gender and cultural identities, and shown the possibilities for greater understanding and inclusivity when we begin to break free from the legacy of heteronormative, colonial Euro-Christian discourses.

Documentary film has historically been strongly associated with Western ethnographic practices (Leuthold, 2010, p. 78), but paradoxically also lends itself to indigenous traditions of articulation and aesthetics. Barry Barclay, a New Zealand documentary maker and writer of Ngāti Apa and Pākehā descent, has perhaps most thoroughly explored the significance and value of indigenous practices, through self-reflexive analysis of his own documentary-making practices (Barclay, 1990). The first and most overt of these practices is the focus on orality, by which the conventional ‘talking head’ format is transformed through the incorporation of indigenous principles of *whai kōrero* (the art of oratory). Both *Georgie Girl* and *Kumu Hina* prioritise the spoken word over ‘objective’ observation or formal narration. This approach suggests indigenous values are passed on, in contrast to ‘a documentary in the usual sense of focussing on factual information or instruction’ (Leuthold, 2010, p. 118). The central characters share their experiences, perspectives, and beliefs with the audience in their own words. Rather than imposing a formal, didactic account of ‘the facts’ through a third-person narrator, the agency of the films’ central subjects is foregrounded through the recognition of their right to tell their own stories. This is not to suggest that those narratives are somehow ‘pure’ representations, since the filmmakers are inevitably responsible for editing the footage into its final form; however, an understanding of and respect for the importance of indigenous oral traditions is powerfully reiterated through the emphasis on self-representation, subjectivity, and the spoken word. In *Kumu Hina*, the history of Hawai’i and Hawai’ian culture is imparted by Hina Wong-Kalu herself—situating her from the beginning as a figure of knowledge and authority, as a teacher and as a guardian of Indigenous knowledge.

Performance is another central principle in many Indigenous traditions, and one that is also evident in these films. Hina and Georgina are both performers, albeit in quite different ways. Georgina Beyer is shown to be a versatile and successful performer in a variety of ways—as a professional actor, as a singer, as a drag queen, and as a political orator. Hina-leimoana Wong-Kalu is a teacher and cultural practitioner of hula—a *kumu hula*—who not only teaches through demonstration, but also participates in performances with her students. The film is a testament to the cultural expertise of Wong-Kalu, demonstrated through her performance of traditional Hawai’ian art forms of chant, song and visual dance. While the indigenous significance of performance is implied rather than overt in *Georgie Girl*, in

Kumu Hina, the centrality of performance establishes a sense of historical and cultural continuity. Hina is the guardian of traditional cultural forms of performance, ones brought to the brink of extinction by the cultural violence of colonialism. Through both teaching and performance, Hina asserts the value of these traditions, erasing the West's mythical attachment to a neat distinction between rationality and art. Hina's performances make it abundantly apparent that knowledge and art are inextricably linked, and that both are profoundly cultural in character. Every hula performance is a resistance to the presumed superiority of Western rationalism and its orthodox versions of history.

The indigenous understanding of history portrayed in *Georgie Girl* and *Kumu Hina* is reflected in their formal construction. The films eschew a linear chronology, emphasising continuity through the merging of past and present. This narrative fluidity reinforces the idea that the present and the future are inextricably connected to the past: knowing where you come from is central to understanding who you are and where you are going. There is a Māori proverb that encapsulates this idea of going forward by looking back:

Inā kei te mohio koe ko wai koe, I anga mai koe i hea, kei te mohio koe. Kei te anga atu ki hea.
(If you know who you are and where you are from, then you will know where you are going.)

Georgina's and Hina's life stories are presented in ways that suggest a more cyclical understanding of temporality. Through this non-linear construction, identity is portrayed as a complex process of reaffirmation, not pre-ordained, not simple, but still grounded in a certainty of self. In keeping with an indigenous worldview, this sense of self is also inextricably tied to the broader community. In *Our Own Image*, Barclay identifies involvement with and respect for the community as central indigenous values. The chosen professions of Hina and Georgina, as teacher and MP respectively, both reflect this, but so too do the filmmakers in their efforts to include the voices and perspectives of the wider communities in which the protagonists live and work. The formal hybridisation of documentary form with indigenous values is a means of fighting back against the cultural devastation of colonialism, using documentary to reappropriate and reinvigorate indigenous culture. The films are not only celebrations of extraordinary individuals, they are simultaneously reflections on identity, culture, community, and indigenous values, and the interconnectedness of those fundamental elements. They are explorations of self-representation, attempts to position 'the camera on the shore' rather than on the boat (Barclay, 1990), in order to present an alternative understanding of gender and culture, through both form and content.

These Pacific documentaries celebrating gender variance stand in contrast to the narratives of pathology and deviance that have predominated in the Western media. Joelle Ruby Ryan has provided a detailed critique of this pejorative tradition in documentary films, as an introductory contextualisation for her discussion of a few films challenging that negativity.

DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

With few exceptions, [media representations of transgender and transsexual people] have been filled with stereotypes, distortions, biases, and inaccuracies. The media, while not solely or even primarily responsible for cultural and systemic transphobia, is an institution that plays a serious role in the perpetuation of prejudice and discrimination against gender-variant people... Traditionally, documentary films that center [sic] on transgender experience have often reproduced ways of looking at gender-variance that are sexist and patriarchal. Gender-normative identity is the standard by which all other expressions are judged. This way of looking fosters a view of transgenderism that is exploitative; trans identities are otherised, fetishised, and cast as deviant, bizarre, and pathological. (2010, p. 10)

Georgie Girl stands in stark contrast to this Western, patriarchal documentary tradition, deliberately constructing a celebratory rather than an exploitative narrative, normalising rather than ‘otherising’ gender diversity. By opting for a non-linear narrative approach, the film is able to open from a positive position, with the focus firmly on the protagonist’s success and standing as a public figure. It is an account of and tribute to Georgina Beyer, the world’s first openly transsexual mayor and later Member of Parliament. The film introduces Georgina to the audience through footage of her maiden speech in parliament, pointing to the historic significance of the moment—‘I have to say it, I guess, I am the first transsexual in New Zealand to be standing in this House of Parliament. This is a first not only in New Zealand, ladies and gentlemen, but also in the world’.

Rejecting the conventional documentary technique of voice-over narration, key information is provided sparingly through text:

in late 1999, Georgina Beyer, a Māori transsexual and former sex worker, was voted into the New Zealand government by a largely white rural electorate [sic]

This sets up the story from the position of Georgina’s success and significance as a highly visible trans woman. It also signposts the central importance of ethnic identity, the bi-cultural tensions that pervade Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the dominance of the Pākehā (white) majority in institutional and social structures that are still strongly inflected with British colonial practices and ideologies. The darker parts of Georgina’s history are also set up through this introductory text, but are placed as secondary, as they are throughout the film, to her achievements. She later recounts her history in non-chronological fragments that are interwoven with events in the present. This formal dialogic construction is reminiscent of indigenous storytelling traditions and the oral practice of *whai korero*, which is emphasised through the amount of screen time devoted to shots of Georgina telling her own story, in her own words. The importance of self-representation is made clear in the film by the agency Georgina is given and the foregrounding of her subjectivity through the absence of a third-person narrator. Georgina is completely open with the audience about her past, as she has been throughout her political career. She relates

the struggles and abuse that she has experienced in her own words, filtered through the lens of her adult self. The calmness with which she details her suicide attempt and her rape while working in the sex industry ensures that the events are not sensationalised, while maintaining significant emotional impact, and acknowledging the harsh realities faced by many trans people. Her refusal to dwell for long on these negative episodes in her life also forecloses the potential for the narrative of victimhood that permeates conventional Western trans documentaries. Darker moments are balanced throughout with contemporary content: emphasising her social contributions and position as a role model and a community leader.

Georgie Girl indicates its allegiance to an indigenous filmmaking approach from the opening, with the use of traditional Māori music laid over shots of the Wairarapa landscape. Without offering any explicit explanation for these elements, the film points to the fundamental significance of the land for Māori as *tangata whenua* (people of the land), as well as to the contribution of indigenous cultural values to the construction of the film. What becomes apparent is the predominant absence of Māori culture from the social and political landscape of Aotearoa/New Zealand that Georgina herself traverses as a public figure, and the damage that being alienated from her own culture has had on her personal life. Where Māori culture has traditionally recognised and valued *whakawahine*, in the heteronormative colonial culture of mainstream New Zealand gender variance is treated with prejudice and morbid fascination. Pushing back against this mainstream view, the film 'eschews the obsession [of traditional documentaries] with etiology and causation and takes trans lives as a reality that does not need explanation or rationalisation' (Ryan, 2010, p. 11). Georgina's trans identity is normalised through the positive framing of her life story, concomitantly rendering the narrow and prejudiced attitudes of mainstream society towards trans people as *abnormal*. In an interview, Georgina observes: 'I get asked questions no other politician would ever have to answer. Regarding the surgery, you know. "Did it hurt?", or, "When you have sex now as a woman, is it different to how you had sex as a man?" Well, honey, obviously'. Goldson and Wells effectively document the Western media's objectionable treatment of Beyer—the rude and intrusive questions, the lack of respect for boundaries and privacy, the presumptuous fascination with physical details, and the inability to look beyond biology in a misguided obsession with 'knowing the truth'.

Georgina critiques this treatment and the underlying assumption that it is warranted by her unusual position as a transsexual holding public office. In its incorporation of indigenous filmmaking practice and through its celebratory approach, the film itself is equally critical of Western media, and careful to distance itself from it. The use of archival footage from media interviews within this framework produces an effect of self-indictment, in much the same way that one of Beyer's political opponents, Paul Henry, says more about himself than Georgina when he tells a reporter, 'You've just said Georgina is a serious person. She's a man. Do those things necessarily go together?'. While

that attitude might have been expected to be the prevailing one within Georgina's own electorate of an overwhelmingly white, largely conservative rural community, she successfully stood first for mayor of Carterton in 1995 and then as a Member of Parliament in 1999. Through interviews with local residents, it becomes clear that her success is a result of her celebration of and commitment to the community, and her investment in the individuals who comprise it. She is praised for her warmth, integrity and intelligence and repeatedly described as being 'down-to-earth', someone who is valued for not being a snob. This suggests that in addition to her personal appeal, her relationship with people of Carterton is one that is founded on a class allegiance, and a sense of exclusion from mainstream urban New Zealand. This commonality is evidently powerful enough to override issues of ethnicity and gender. While this grants Georgina access to mainstream political institutions, it also reinforces the marginalisation of Māori culture—most clearly illustrated in the years after the film was made when Beyer voted in favour the Foreshore and Seabed Act of 2004, which effectively dispossessed Māori of their guardianship rights over land supposedly guaranteed under the Treaty of Waitangi.

Beyer herself later acknowledged this as a betrayal of indigenous rights, and acknowledged the need to make amends to Māori as one of her primary reasons for standing for Parliament in the 2014 general election: 'When approached about the role, there were a few things to consider as there always are. Taking on this role is my way of making amends to Māori for voting for the foreshore and seabed bill which I was forced into and which totally broke me' (Harawira, 2014). When Georgina does mention her Māori identity in the film, which is rare, she frames it as a lack, an alienation from her cultural heritage. There is one other key Māori figure in the film Carmen, the matriarch of the New Zealand trans community. She is Georgina's friend and mentor but her ethnicity is never mentioned, with the focus firmly on her trans identity. Both Carmen and Georgina underscore the cultural alienation that continues in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Despite Georgina's strong ties to her electorate, a sense of isolation surrounds her not only from her cultural roots, but also in her personal life. Georgina is single, unwilling to subject a partner to the inevitable media scrutiny that she experiences. Ultimately though, the film is a celebration of trans identity, presented through a non-traditional documentary approach that, while not denying her challenges and suffering, allows Georgina's success to be the main focus from the start.

The appeal of this more positive approach is reflected in the overwhelmingly favourable reviews and critical accolades the film received. Despite dealing with the potentially provocative issues of trans politics, indigenous politics, and cultural politics, the positivity of *Kumu Hina* has likewise resonated with audiences in very varied contexts. For example, indigenous writers have applauded *Kumu Hina* for bringing to the screen the story of:

A master of practice and language. [Hina] is a community leader and champion. She is stunning and glorious... Hina transformed the role of māhū in Hawai'i. By

asserting herself and using the powerful framework of Hawai'ian culture, she continues to enforce the strength and importance of people whose identities cannot be defined by Westernised, cookie-cutter standards. (Kehaulani Watson, 2014, n.p.)

At the other end of the spectrum, the film finds appreciation, even enthusiastic support, in an unexpected quarter. In his review of the film on his blog, Father Dennis Kriz, a Catholic priest, observes that,

One of the most interesting levels for me is simply: Is Christianity / Catholicism (which is about a Universal Church big enough FOR EVERYBODY who sincerely belongs there) capable of learning from other cultures / traditions? (Kriz, 2015, n.p.)

Despite writing from a fairly traditional Catholic position and deploying some problematic stereotypes about trans people, Father Dennis acknowledges the value of alternative cultural understandings and the ways in which they can contribute to a more empathetic and inclusive approach. *Kumu Hina* challenges ideas of emotional segregation head-on, and focusses unflinchingly on the intersectionality of class, culture, indigeneity and gender in a way that resonates with diverse audiences. It is an exploration of identity, identification and allegiance, an acknowledgement of the damage that colonialism has done. It is an homage to those trying to reclaim their culture, language, history, but presented in a way that foregrounds the principle of *aloha*: love, honour and respect for all.

The constant repetition of the word *aloha* throughout *Kumu Hina* is an example of linguistic decolonisation. The word draws attention not only to the Hawai'ian language, but to the cultural philosophy that underpins it: one that stands in stark contrast to the exclusionary ideology of the West. In an act of deliberate resistance against the linguistic domination of colonialism, the film makes a point of incorporating the native language (with subtitles) to draw attention to the intimate connection between language and culture, and the fundamental importance of preserving language as a way of maintaining an alternative worldview, an attitude to and understanding of the world that is encapsulated in the word *aloha*. Early on in the film, in response to a pupil's desire to wear both a boys' and a girls' lei, Hina demonstrates the flexibility of language in her response: 'You get both [lei] because she's both.' The mode of address shifts easily from the pupil, Ho'onani, to the wider class, highlighting the inseparability of the individual from their broader community. The use of indigenous language constitutes an example of what Barry Barclay calls 'talking in', that is, talking to your own people first (Barclay, 1990, p. 76). At the same time, the use of subtitles allows the film to 'talk out' to a broader audience, and to draw attention to the richness of indigenous languages as a means for conveying an alternative worldview and cultural philosophy. Despite being made by two white middle-class American men (albeit ones with a history of counter-normative documentary activism)², the film is very loyal to the concept of *aloha* (harmony, inclusivity, love and respect),³ something that Hina points out in her historical overview of Hawai'i was fundamentally antithetical to the conceptual framework of European colonisers.

DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

The history of Hawai'i that is narrated near the beginning of the film by Hina Wong-Kalu is presented in animated form (drawn by Jarrod Greenleaf). The animation provides a visual interpretation of pre-contact Hawai'i that draws on traditional indigenous aesthetics, and documents the colonisation of the country in a way that deliberately refuses to make use of the archival images of the West's ethnographic photographic documentation of the period. It is an independent visual representation that is both artistically loyal to indigenous traditions and politically distant from an orthodox Western account of Pacific colonisation. The images have a fluidity that makes clear the long history of Hawai'i, shifting seamlessly through hundreds of years of cultural constancy, incorporating a deliberate focus on the presence and significance of *māhū* in Hawai'ian culture:

Every person had their role in society, whether male, female, or *māhū*—those who embraced the masculine and feminine traits that are embodied within each and every one of us.

Māhū were highly valued and respected in traditional Hawaiian society, but like so many other aspects of the indigenous culture and language, the colonial powers and especially missionaries tried to stamp the practice out as immoral:

The 18th century introduction of Western European cultures and religions brought disease and war, in addition to a clash of values that continues to this day... Fast forward to contemporary Hawai'i, and *māhū* still feel the effects of this intolerance of a traditionally-accepted group of people. Those who choose not to hide their identities must constantly fight barriers in family life, school, the workplace and politics. (Seeto, 2015, n.p.)

Yet in concluding her narration of these attempts at cultural annihilation, Hina observes that 'Despite 200 years of colonisation and aggression, we're still here.' In extrapolating this to her own life, she acknowledges that her own 'progression is simply indicative of me coming to a different understanding. It was my own process of self-decolonisation.' This exemplifies the value of the narrative agency that Hina has in the film; it is not an external assessment or 'truth', but a personal and self-reflexive testimony about the impact of colonialist ideology on an ongoing social and individual level.

While the film is an intentionally respectful portrayal of the cultural and community value of *māhū*, it is not naive enough to suggest that Hina's life has been easy. The intolerance Seeto describes is acknowledged by Hina in a first-person account of the bullying and suffering she experienced as a teenager (2015). However, as with *Georgie Girl*, this is deliberately brief, since the film chooses not to present a narrative of victimhood. The focus soon shifts to the refuge Hina found in Hawai'ian culture particularly in *aloha* and in her belief in her responsibility to the community to pass on the meaning of *aloha*. Most importantly, the film highlights Hina's value as a teacher and a leader through

her interactions with one of her *hula hālau* pupils, Ho'onani Kamai, a young girl who already displays *māhū* tendencies. Describing herself as 'in the middle' between *kāne* (men) and *wahine* (women), Ho'onani emerges as the leader in the boys' *hula* group, and displays extraordinary confidence in her own sense of self, as well as unwavering respect for and devotion to Hawai'ian cultural traditions. Ho'onani is extremely clear about who she is and what she wants, displaying a great deal of maturity in her refusal to be constrained by the heteronormative expectations that still manifest themselves in post-colonial Hawai'ian society. In contrast to the bullying and discrimination Hina suffered as a teenager, Ho'onani is accepted and respected by her peers, and by the older boys in the *hula* group that she leads. As her mentor and role-model Hina points out, Ho'onani has more *ku* (male energy) than any of the teenage boys in the *hula hula*, because *ku* is about so much more than biology, and therefore not just a property of biological males.

Ho'onani is given an opportunity to learn the cultural knowledge that was denied to several generations of Hawai'ians, including her own mother, Jozie, and Laara, the principal of the school. In admonishing the children to treat Kumu Hina with respect and appreciate the heritage, Principal Laara reminds the children that 'We didn't get to sing Hawai'i Pono'i in our schools. We had to pledge allegiance to the flag that took over Hawai'i.' Ho'onani embraces her heritage wholeheartedly through the traditional knowledge and practices that Hina teaches. At Hālau Lōkahi School's end of year show,⁴ Ho'onani leads the boys-only *hula* group, as they perform the 'ai ka mūmū kēkē *hula*. Her power and authority are both moving and inspiring, attesting to Hina's success in instilling understanding and respect for Hawai'ian culture by reviving and honouring indigenous knowledge. It is also a visual performance of *aloha*, a celebration of inclusivity and diversity.

The editing of the film draws clear parallels between Hina and Ho'onani, contrasting the confidence that Ho'onani innately feels in her own sense of self with the self-assurance that Hina has worked so hard to achieve and maintain. The film makes clear how much this individual sense of self is linked to a broader community attitude and a shift away from a Euro-Christian colonialist perspective towards a more traditional indigenous philosophy, particularly with regard to gender. Ho'onani states with absolute conviction when discussing *māhū*, those in the 'middle', that 'What "middle" means is a person who's rare... they're rare.' While the idea of 'the middle' seems to be a legacy of the Western heteronormative binary brought to Hawai'i by American missionaries, it is equally clear that Ho'onani has the capacity to conceptualise that identity in ways that exceed the restrictive gender taxonomies of the English language. This moment illustrates the central role of language in expressing particular cultural values and traditions, and the importance of learning indigenous languages as a way of facilitating the transmission and celebration of those values and traditions. The integration of indigenous language, art forms, and cultural values into schools, through *kumu* such as Hina Wong-Kalu, is an important step in the decolonisation of Western institutions, such as schools, that are still strongly marked by colonialist practices.

Despite its focus on institutional politics, *Kumu Hina* is also a highly personal story, portraying the challenges that Hina faces in her private life in conjunction with her success and status as a cultural icon in her professional life—apart from being a valued *kumu*, Hina is also the highly respected chairperson of the O’ahu Burial Council, a position that brings to the fore the difficulties of reconciling native traditions and values with Western law and institutional policies. This professional and political dimension to her story is intertwined with her personal search to find ‘what everyone else wants love, care, acceptance.’ She is relatively newly married to a Fijian man, Hema, who displays worryingly patriarchal attitudes about gender roles. Hina is very open about the love she feels for her husband, but also about the challenges *māhū* face in finding committed and accepting life partners. At one point, after Hema hurls abuse at her for talking to a male friend on the phone, Hina is visibly upset and observes that *māhū* in relationships often ask themselves if it is worth it. Being with Hema challenges her confidence in herself at times, particularly when under pressure to pass as a woman with Hema’s friends in Fiji in order to protect both him and herself from potential trans- and homophobic backlash against their relationship. While Hina sees her *māhū* identity as ‘being the real you’ she is well aware that there are many people who view it instead as a form of deception; that it is not an identity that is respected everywhere.

Hema’s disrespectful treatment of Hina during certain moments of ‘brutal but necessary realism’ in the film is extremely uncomfortable to watch, and inevitably raises questions for the audience about the value of the relationship (Lytton, 2014, n.p.). Hina, however, chooses to believe that ‘the diamond I see in my husband will one day be very shiny indeed’ that ‘faith, courage, and love will overcome.’ The scenes depicting the struggles in their relationship are also contrasted throughout the film with scenes of great tenderness between the two, and with the challenges Hema faces in adapting to life in a new country while striving to maintain his sense of self and his links with Fijian culture. Hina believes that she can help through the ‘magic of *māhū*’ so takes him on a roadtrip into rural Hawai’i to meet her friends, including Kaua’i Iki, her oldest friend who is also *māhū*. It is an opportunity to show Hina as part of a broader community, to illustrate the internal heterogeneity of *māhū*, and to demonstrate the importance of maintaining a support network. The ‘grounded, centred’ spirit of *māhū* that Hina describes does seem to have the desired effect on Hema, and the final sequence of the film conveys a sense of cautious optimism about the relationship, as Hema is shown carefully choosing a birthday gift, cake and candles for Hina’s birthday. This he presents to her on the lawns outside the historic ‘Iolani Palace where he works as a security guard. It is a scene of great tenderness and emotional intimacy, but the closing credit sequence turns away from this to a somewhat haunting *hula* performance by Hina, alone against a backdrop of extraordinary natural beauty. It leaves the audience with a powerful sense of Hawai’i and Hawai’ian culture, and Hina’s valuable role as a *kumu* in preserving that heritage.

As documentaries about high-profile trans people from the Pacific, *Kumu Hina* and *Georgie Girl* display several significant similarities in their celebratory approach of trans identities, framing them as valuable and normal, in direct contrast to the negativity that pervades most Western trans documentaries. The crucial divergences between the films are in the protagonists' relationships to indigenous culture. This may be in part due to cultural shifts in the decade between the two films, but it still creates a striking contrast between the role of indigenous culture in Hawai'i and in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The individuals at the centre of these stories are defined in part by their relationships to the community, but the value of Hina's connection to her cultural heritage, and the strength she draws from it, brings into relief the lack of a similar connection in Georgina's life. It highlights the fundamental importance of decolonisation on a personal and a political level, and of reviving and revaluing indigenous culture.

To turn one's back on one's ancestors is to sever oneself from one's future.

—Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu

Notes

1. Some significant examples of indigenous non-binary gender identities include: the *Hijra* of South Asia, *fa'afafine* of Samoa, *fakaleiti* of Tonga, *māhū* of Hawai'i, *whakawahine* of Aotearoa/New Zealand, *kathoey*s of Thailand, *waria* of Indonesia, *muxe* of Mexico, and the multiple Two-Spirit identities among Native American tribes.
2. Hamer and Wilson were previously best known for their autobiographical documentary, *Out in the Silence* (2009), about their struggles for acceptance as a gay couple in small-town America.
3. The fact that so many English words are needed to adequately translate the concept illustrates the fundamental importance of language as a carrier of unique cultural values and concepts.
4. Hālau Lōkahi School is a public charter school described in the film as 'dedicated to Hawai'ian culture, language, and history'

References

- Barclay, B. (1990). *Our own image*. Auckland: Longman Paul.
- Goldson, A. (Producer), Goldson, A. & Wells, P (Directors). (2002). *Georgie girl*. [Motion Picture]. New Zealand: Occasional Productions.
- Hamer, D., & Wilson, J. (Producers & Directors). (2009). *Out in the silence*. [Motion Picture]. United States: qWaves.
- Hamer, D., & Wilson, J. (Producers & Directors). (2014). *Kumu hina*. [Motion Picture]. United States: qWaves.
- Harawira, H. (2014, July 27). Georgina Beyer to stand for MANA in Te Tai Tonga. Retrieved August 29, 2015, from <http://mana.net.nz/2014/07/georgina-beyer-to-stand-for-mana-in-te-tai-tonga/>
- Kumu Hina | Home. (n.d.). Retrieved August 9, 2015, from <http://kumuhina.com/>
- Kehaulani Watson, T. (2014, June 10). *Kumu hina*: A story of triumph for all of Hawai'i. Retrieved August 10, 2015, from www.huffingtonpost.com/trisha-kehaulani-watson/kumu-hina-a-story-of-triumph-for-all-of-hawai-i

DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

- Kriz, D. Z. (2015, April 9). Fr. Dennis at the movies: *Kumu hina* (2014) [Review of the film *Kumu hina*]. *Fr. Dennis at the movies*. Retrieved from <http://frdennismovie reviews.blogspot.co.nz/2015/04/kumu-hina-2014.html>
- Leuthold, S. (2010). *Indigenous aesthetics: Native art, media, and identity*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Lytton, A. (2014, July 17). The film that charmed frameline [Review of the film *Kumu hina*]. *Frameline*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.indiewire.com/bent/the-film-that-charmed-frameline-the-reasons-why-award-winning-indie-documentary-kumu-hina-deserves-a-wide-audience-are-precisely-why-it-might-miss-out-20140717>
- Ryan, J. R. (2010). Diversifying and complicating representations of trans lives: five documentaries about gender identity. *Feminist Collections: A Quarterly of Women's Studies Resources*, 31(3), 10-16.
- Seeto, M. (2015, February 2). *Kumu hina*: Teaching us all about love and acceptance [Review of the film *Kumu hina*]. iExaminer. Retrieved from www.iexaminer.org/2015/02/kumu-hina-teaching-us-all-about-love-and-acceptance/

Suzanne Woodward is a graduate of the University of Cape Town, the University of the Western Cape, and completed her doctorate in Film at the University of Auckland, where she teaches in the Department of Media, Film and Television. Her doctoral thesis was an exploration of trans representations in mainstream films across four different genres, and her current research is in the areas of critical race theory, indigeneity, gender, sexuality and digital cultures.
s.woodward@auckland.ac.nz

